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Prisoner Conflict: The Role of Shame, Masculinity and Respect

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Interpersonal violence in prison creates an unsafe environment for prison staff and prisoners alike whilst also contributing to a culture of fear and suspicion within the prison. The present paper seeks to build upon the social psychological literature on violence, as well as the findings of previous studies on prisoner-on-prisoner conflict, to better understand the causes of and context within which prisoner confrontations occur. What follows is a highly selective reading around these various literatures, focusing in particular on shame, masculinity, cognition and self-identity, beginning with the cognition of violent individuals. In addition, some preliminary findings from an ongoing research project on prisoner conflict will also be presented².

The Cognition of Violent Individuals

Numerous researchers have found that people who engage in aggressive behaviour tend to routinely make attributions of hostile intent to the actions of others, also known as a hostile attributional bias (e.g. Nasby, Hayden & DePaulo 1979). They also tend to selectively focus upon, and perceive, more hostile cues over and above other cues within a social setting, tend to form more hostile interpretations of ambiguous situations and tend to generate more violent responses to these situations (e.g. Dodge & Newman, 1981; & Dodge, 2003). However, the literature on hostile attribution bias has little to say about the origins of this biased social-information processing. Nonetheless, suggestions can be found in the work of Beck (1999) on the psychology of violence.

Beck (1999) argues that an individual with a vulnerable sense of self, or self-narrative, will be hypersensitive to certain social situations and perceive insults where none were intended. A vulnerable sense of self is theorised as being a sense of self which is steeped in shame and humiliation (Young, 2003; 1999; Gilligan, 2001; 1996; Scheff

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& Retzinger, 1991). Beck proposes that a shamed based self-narrative leads people to perceive actions as being highly personalised, to be selective in what cues they process, to overgeneralise their hostile interpretations and to deny responsibility for their aggressive behaviour. Thus, an individual's self-narrative may influence their social-information processing by acting as a filter for the processing of incoming cues and by providing a framework within which the new information can be interpreted. A self-narrative is a story that a person constructs to explain their behaviour, motivations, feelings and desires, within a meaningful and sequential framework, and can be used as a means of examining an individual's understanding of themselves (McAdams, 1985). However, questions remain about what types of self-narratives lead an individual to be especially prone to violence.

The Psychosocial Dynamics of Aggression

Self-narratives that are steeped in shame are said to lead to violence as such individuals will engage in hyper-masculine behaviour in order to compensate for the shame that they are experiencing (e.g. Katz, 1988; Scheff & Retzinger, 1991; Gilligan, 1996; 2001; & Gaylin, 1984). Shame is a painful emotion that is normally accompanied by a sense of 'being small', of shrinking, worthlessness, and powerlessness. It may also be accompanied by imagery of how one's defective self would appear to others (Tangney & Stuewig, 2004). However, there has been debate surrounding the link between shame and aggression. Scheff and Retzinger (1991) argue that it is not shame which leads to interpersonal violence but rather *unresolved* shame (see also Braithwaite and Braithwaite, 2001; Harris, 2001). Lewis (1971) also argued that protracted rage always has its roots in unresolved shame and that unresolved shame is a primary cause of destructive rage.

But why should feelings of shame or unresolved shame result in aggressive behaviour? Social identity theory states that a person's self-concept is composed from their social identity and their personal identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1981). Social identity refers to how we are perceived by others (e.g. status), while personal identity refers to how we perceive ourselves (e.g. self-image). Researchers have argued that violent behaviour towards others arises from the anger a person experiences when they feel that they have been slighted or disrespected (see Gilligan, 1996 & 2001;

Barbalet, 1998; Storr, 1972; Gaylin, 1984; & Scheff and Retzinger, 1991). Miller (2001) suggested that respect, and disrespect, play an important role in our understanding of ourselves because it tells us something about our status, or social standing, as perceived by others. In other words, respect and disrespect have ramifications for our self-concept. Thus, when an individual feels that they have been unfairly treated or wronged this reflects negatively on their sense of self. In other words, individuals with self-narratives that are steeped in shame, particularly unresolved shame, may be more likely to attribute hostile intent to the actions of others due to their increased sensitivity to the opinions of others and their treatment by others. Thus, people with shame based self-narratives, particularly those expressing unresolved shame, may be more likely to have a hostile attributional bias, to generate more violent responses to an ambiguous social situation and to deny responsibility for their aggressive behaviour.

Violence within the Prison Environment

Edgar, O'Donnell and Martin. (2002) state that "*Respect becomes particularly important in prison when one has little else*" (p138). Indeed, prisoners may be particularly sensitive to their treatment by the prison, prison officers and other prisoners as they may already be feeling ashamed, humiliated and devalued by society. Such feelings may be further amplified when they are not treated respectfully. One prisoner highlighted the importance of respect in prison and his willingness to engage in violence if disrespected:

*"How dare they speak to me like that! They have no respect for you so it's not surprising that we talk to them the way we do. They think they are better than us just because they have keys but they forget that they are paid to be our lackeys, to lock us up and unlock us, and to get us what we want. But they forget that. If they talk to me like that then of course I'm going to square up to them. They're not going to get away with treating me like that. I don't care what they do to me, I'm already in prison and I'd prefer to do more time for hitting them than to ignore them and have them disrespect me."*³

³ This quote was taken from field notes taken by the author while attending Dialogue groups in HMP Norwich during 2003-2004 as in Footnote 1.

The interviews conducted by Edgar et al, (2002) revealed that the most frequent reasons given for engaging in prisoner conflict were feeling wronged, feeling a threat to status, feeling a threat to self-image, drugs, material gain and enjoyment. Interestingly, the majority of these reasons appear to be related to an individual's self-concept. In other words, an individual's interpretation of an event as unfair, disrespectful or potentially shaming was crucial in determining whether that person engaged in prisoner-on-prisoner conflict. Even arguments and violence arising over debts and drugs can revolve around issues of respect and self-image. One participant, when asked why prisoners fight over debts and drugs, responded *"Respect ain't it. Respect. Basically, if you don't pay someone back other people will look at it and they'll think 'They are being taken for an idiot', and other people will start taking you for an idiot. That's what happens"*⁴

In prison, status tends to be based upon displays of hegemonic masculinity but the prison environment largely limits the expression of hegemonic masculinity to displays of toughness (e.g. Sykes, 1956). In addition, what is perceived as shaming may vary depending upon the social context surrounding the individual. Thus, within the prison environment feelings of inadequacy at being unable to defend oneself or loved ones may be experienced as shaming. When one prisoner questions another prisoner's toughness, he not only questions that prisoner's status but he may also be perceived as attempting to shame him. In such circumstances the prisoner is encouraged to fight to 'prove' his masculinity and retain his status. One participant explains:

"...when an argument starts everyone's like watching, sort of like, like waiting around to see the potential trouble. You feel like you sort of have to stand up for yourself... When you back down someone else might notice and think that you are weak, do you know what I mean? It is just a thing that happens everyday in here. You have to know how to handle yourself."

⁴ This quote was taken from an interview with a prisoner in Wayland prison during 2004-2005. The interview was conducted as part of Michelle Butler's Ph.D Thesis. All remaining prisoner quotes in this paper are taken from the preliminary findings of Michelle Butler's Ph.D Thesis.

Further, theorists have argued that hypermasculinity, or machismo, is actually a mechanism used by people to reduce feelings of shame and humiliation (Gilligan, 1996, 2001; & Young, 1999; 2003). Hypermasculinity may therefore be used to bolster an individual's self-concept against threats to their status and against threats to their self-image.

The Present Study

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the role of prisoner self-narratives and social-information processing in prisoner-on-prisoner conflict. By conflict I mean physical fights, confrontations, arguments and the use of threats. Specifically, prisoners' social-information processing will be examined for overgeneralisations of hostility, a hostile attributional bias and denial of responsibility for aggressive behaviour. Drawing on in-depth interviews with prisoners at a Category C prison, the present study seeks to examine whether these cognitive patterns are associated with prisoners' self-narratives and their future involvement in prisoner-on-prisoner conflict. Prisoner self-narratives are investigated for a relationship between these patterns of social-information processing and themes of shame and masculinity within their self-narrative. In addition, themes of agency and generativity within the participants' self-narratives will also be coded using McAdams (1992) Agency Coding Scheme and Steward, Franz and Layton (1988) Generativity Coding Scheme.

In order to conduct this study, one hundred participants will be interviewed and asked to complete some questionnaires consisting of social demographics, personality type questions, locus of control, self-esteem, a hostile interpretation questionnaire and a self-reported involvement in prisoner conflict. In addition, participants will also be asked to complete a one month follow up questionnaire about their involvement in prisoner-on-prisoner conflict in the month following their interview. This is done to investigate whether themes of shame and masculinity, and social-information processing can predict future involvement in prisoner-on-prisoner conflict. The preliminary findings presented in this paper are based upon forty interviews and one month follow ups, completed so far. All analyses presented in this paper control for the relevant personality and sentence variables.

Preliminary Findings

Analysis of the interviews conducted so far reveals that the type of shame expressed in the participants' self-narratives significantly predicts their involvement in future occurrences of prisoner-on-prisoner conflict, during the one month follow-up period. Three types of shame were coded: no shame, resolved shame and unresolved shame. The coding scheme used to identify the type of shame expressed (if any) within the participants' self-narratives was based upon the theoretical writings of Braithwaite (1989). Resolved shame involved the acknowledgement of having disappointed significant others and oneself through one's behaviour. It is the person's behaviour that is shamed and not the person, the person is still perceived as being inherently good and continues to be supported by the community and significant others (Braithwaite, 1989). In contrast, unresolved shame is not directly acknowledged, rather the person is perceived by significant others and the community as being inherently bad or different from 'normal' people (Braithwaite, 1989). The person is shamed rather than their behaviour and they feel that they are not being supported or accepted by the wider community. Participant self-narratives were coded as expressing no shame if they made no reference to shame either directly or indirectly. In other words, they did not express any feelings of hurt, disappointment, alienation or perceived lack of acceptance by the wider community. Below are some quotes used to exemplify the different types of shame coded for:

No Shame

"I left school when I was fourteen, basically, I started getting into crime and that, then I got into drugs. I started doing drugs from the age of fifteen, basically, until now. Since the age of twelve I've been in and out of boarding school, foster care and stuff like that, and just wanting to turn eighteen, and it's been like that ever since to tell you the truth"

Resolved Shame

"So I was just like, I was hurt, I was, I weren't even angry and that, I was just hurt. I felt like I let everyone down, my Mum and that, my friends, and I let myself down because I'd done so well to get my first job and get my first record out and that, and then to get nicked for something like drugs was just like totally out of the question....."

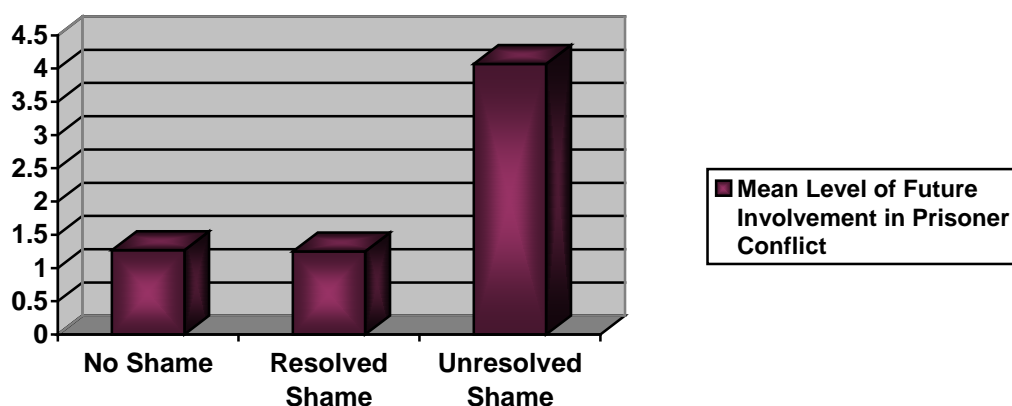
even when I am in prison now, like all my friends and that I grew up with, they all come to see me, their kids and that, like, they let me know that when I get out, don't worry about it... I've got the support of my friends and family"

Unresolved Shame

"Well I know what's going to happen, if I go back to the same area I'm either going to be dead or I'm going to end up killing someone that's how, that's how it's going to be. That is how it is where I live, it's just survival out there.....Some people live on the outskirts of London, like the private places and that, some people don't grow up to see things like some of us have seen, they don't care, they don't care, do you get me? They just want us to kill each other and put the other person away.....It's like even the Police are against us in my area"

Participants whose self-narratives were coded as expressing themes of unresolved shame were significantly more likely to engage in future occurrences of prisoner-on-prisoner conflict than those expressing no shame or resolved shame [$\beta=.303$; $p<.05$]. See graph 1.

Graph 1: Type of Shame and Future Involvement in Prisoner Conflict.



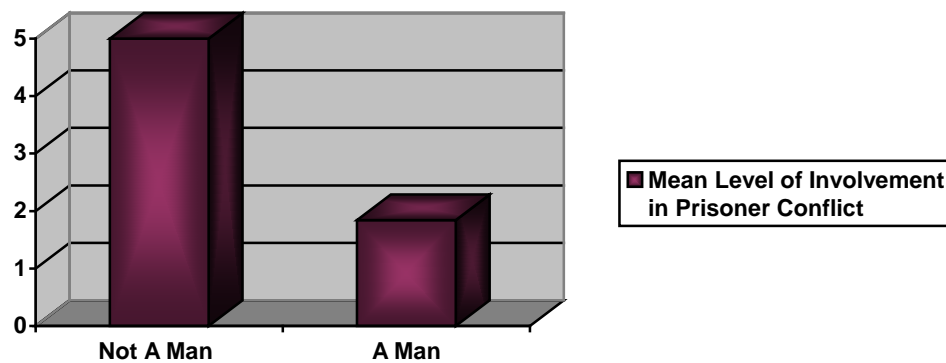
In addition, themes of generativity and agency were associated with the type of shame expressed within the participant's self-narrative. Generativity is defined as *"the concern for and commitment to promoting the next generation"* (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1998; pxx). Significantly more themes of agency and generativity were

associated with participants expressing resolved shame. In other words, participants who expressed a desire to help others, and those who believed that they had the ability to influence the direction their life was taking, tended to express feelings of resolved shame. In contrast, participants with a history of drug addiction and from lower socioeconomic statuses tended to express more themes of unresolved shame [$\beta = -.269$; $p < .05$; and $\beta = -.225$; $p < .05$ respectively]. Participants from poorer backgrounds with a history of drug addiction tended to feel looked down upon by society in general and as a result of this tended to report more themes of unresolved shame.

With regards to masculinity, the individual participants are asked what they think it means to be a man and their answers are then combined into categories based upon commonalities in their response. Some examples of these categories are: having a family and providing for them, being responsible for themselves and significant others, being independent, being able to defend themselves and stand up for their rights, and having a flash car, flash clothes and lots of money. This is done so as not to impose different definitions of masculinity upon the participants as Messerschmidt (1993) has previously highlighted that the definition of masculinity changes depending upon the socio-economic status, class and background of the person. Nonetheless, the different categorical definitions of masculinity were not significantly associated with their future involvement in prisoner-on-prisoner conflict.

However, whether they considered themselves to be men or not did significantly predict their involvement in future occurrences of prisoner conflict. Only 12.5% of participants did not yet consider themselves to be men but these participants engaged in significantly more prisoner-on-prisoner conflict during the one month follow-up period [$\beta = -.424$; $p < .05$]. See graph 2.

Graph 2: Masculinity and Future Involvement in Prisoner Conflict



Participants who did not yet consider themselves to be men thought of themselves as 'lads' or 'boys'. They thought of themselves in this way because as far as they were concerned they were not yet settled down nor did they have any responsibilities. Being settled down and having responsibilities was, in their eyes, what being a man was all about:

"I don't really think that I am a man, I am mature at times but I am mature to an extent that I know what's what and look after myself. I know the basics, do you know what I mean, but I'm not settled if you know what I mean"

"I don't, I don't know. I would say I'm a lad. I think a man is, is when you get a job, get a house, kids and that, a wife, a family. I suppose that is a real man, one that provides for his family, his wife and stuff like that, puts a roof over there heads. But I'm just a lad"

The age of the participant, and themes of agency within their self-narratives, significantly predicted whether participants perceived themselves as men or not. Older participants tended to perceived themselves as men [$\beta = .285$; $p < .05$]. Further, participants who believed that they had control over the direction their life was taking also tended to perceived themselves as man, participants who did not believe that they could influence their life tended to perceive themselves as boys or lads [$\beta = .294$; $p < .05$].

As for the participant's social-information processing, the analysis so far reveals that the participant's denial of responsibility for their aggressive behaviour significantly predicts their future involvement in prisoner-on-prisoner conflict with higher levels of denial associated with higher levels of prisoner conflict [$\beta = .404$; $p < .05$]. Further, themes of generativity within the participants' self-narratives also significantly predicted their denial of responsibility. Participants expressing more themes of generativity within their self-narrative tended to express less denial for their aggressive behaviour [$\beta = -.432$; $p < .05$].

No other variables were found to significantly predict participant's involvement in prisoner conflict.

Summary

In summary, denial of responsibility for aggressive behaviour, whether the participant perceived themselves as a man or not, and the type of shame they expressed in their self-narrative significantly predicted their future involvement in prisoner-on-prisoner conflict. The type of shame expressed within their self-narrative was, in particular, a strong predictor of both future and past involvement in prisoner conflict. Participants with a history of drug addiction and from lower socio-economic statuses tended to express more themes of unresolved shame. For example one participant discussed the shame associated with being a drug addict and a criminal:

"People think they are better than you because you use drugs... They think you are criminal and that because, like a lot of people think that because like you are a criminal that they can't trust you in their house and things like that, which is right in some cases but wrong in most cases. They see you as a criminal or as an addict rather than as a person".

Another participant stated:

"I suppose, some of them might not want to know me because being a heroin addict is one of the worst things that people can do in a lot of people's eyes and once an addict always an addict. My dad used to own a garage, he died

like but the mechanic there spoke to my sister and said something like 'There'll be no happy ending to this, you'll find him somewhere with a needle in his arm, he's a smackhead' and all this".

Such sentiments demonstrate the link between shame, particularly unresolved shame, with social exclusion and "othering". Othering is a way of defining and securing one's own positive identity through the stigmatization and marginalisation of an "other" (Young 1999). Participants exposed to such experiences seemed to be more sensitive to their treatment by other prisoners. They tended to react more aggressively to incidents of disrespect where, in the words of one participant, disrespect was perceived as *"not knowing who I am, thinking that I'm, I'm, I'm a nobody"*. Thus, participants with experiences of stigmatisation and marginalisation tended to express more themes of unresolved shame within their self-narratives. These participants seemed to be more sensitive to incidents of disrespect by their fellow inmates and to react more aggressively when disrespected. As a result of this, fights and arguments often arose over queue jumping at dinnertime, and during association, as queue jumping was perceived as treating the person as if they were invisible. One participant explained why he had got into a confrontation with another prisoner over queue jumping:

"I think it was more 'hang on, what am I invisible' you know, it is just like showing other people that he has just cut in with no respect at all really. Yeah, you know 'your nothing and I'm better than you and I'm going to cut in in front of you'. It's pathetic really. In places like this it is all about respect".

Unfortunately, this means that it will be difficult to dramatically reduce the occurrence of prisoner conflict, over incidents involving disrespect, for participants with themes of unresolved shame as to do so would require the reduction of experiences of stigmatisation and marginalisation within the wider community. Nonetheless, it may be possible to reduce prisoner conflict by attempting to reduce occurrences of stigmatisation and marginalisation within the prison, by facilitating the maintenance of family and other social bonds, and by attempting to facilitate and maintain prisoner integration into the wider community. The provision of practical vocational, educational and treatment courses which will be of use to prisoners upon

their release may further help to return a sense of agency to prisoners. This may indirectly lower levels of prisoner conflict by promoting expressions of resolved shame and masculinity. The provision of such courses may also help to provide prisoners with an alternative means of achieving status, and a positive sense of self, which may otherwise be achieved through the use of violence. For example, Gilligan (2001) argues that education is particularly good at reducing the occurrence of violence amongst prisoners. In addition, the provision of treatment courses may help prisoners to reduce their denial of responsibility for their aggressive behaviour and provide them with alternative means of dealing with disrespect (Gilligan & Lee, 2005).

In conclusion, the preliminary findings so far support the proposed relationship between shame and aggression, with participants expressing unresolved shame engaging in more occurrences of prisoner-on-prisoner conflict than those expressing either resolved shame or no shame within their self-narrative. Further, participants who perceived themselves to be men engaged in less prisoner conflict than those who perceived themselves to be lads or boys. However, in the analyses so far shame and masculinity do not significantly predict the participants' biased social-information processing.

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